

The Return of SHERLOCK HOLMES

By A. CONAN DOYLE.

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The Adventure of the Empty House

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In the spring of the year 1891 that all London was interested and the fashionable world dismayed by the murder of the Hon. Ronald Adair under most unusual and inexplicable circumstances. The public has already learned those particulars of the crime which came out in the police investigation, but a good deal was suppressed upon that occasion, since the name for the prosecution was so overwhelmingly strong that it was not necessary to bring forward all the facts. Only now, at the end of nearly ten years, am I allowed to supply those missing links which make up the whole of that remarkable chain. The crime was of interest in itself, but that interest was as nothing to me compared to the inconceivable sequel, which afforded me the greatest shock and surprise of any event in my adventurous life. From now, after this long interval, I find myself thrilling as I think of it and feeling once more that sudden flood of joy, amazement and incredulity which utterly subverted my mind. Let me say to that public, which has shown some interest in these glimpses which I have occasionally given them of the thoughts and actions of a very remarkable man, that they are not to blame me if I have not shared my knowledge with them, for I should have considered it my first duty to have done so if I had been barred by a positive prohibition from my own lips, which was only withdrawn upon the 3d of last month.

It can be imagined that my close intimacy with Sherlock Holmes had interested me deeply in crime and that after his disappearance I never failed to read with care the various problems which came before the public. And I even attempted more than once for my own private satisfaction to employ his methods in their solution, though with indifferent success. There was none, however, which appealed to me like this tragedy of Ronald Adair. As I read the evidence at the inquest, which led up to a verdict of wilful murder against some person or persons unknown, I realized more clearly than I had ever done the loss which the community had sustained by the death of Sherlock Holmes.

There were points about this strange business which would, I was sure, have specially appealed to him, and the efforts of the police would have been supplemented or more probably anticipated by the trained observation and the alert mind of the first criminal agent in Europe. All day as I drove upon my round I turned over the case in my mind and found no explanation which appeared to me to be adequate. At the risk of telling a twice told tale I will recapitulate the facts as they were known to the public at the conclusion of the inquest.

The Hon. Ronald Adair was the second son of the Earl of Maynooth, at that time governor of one of the Australian colonies. Adair's mother had returned from Australia to under the operation for cancer, and she, her son Ronald and her daughter Hilda were living together at 427 Park lane. The youth moved in the best society—had, so far as was known, no enemies and no particular views. He had been engaged to Miss Edith Woodley of Carstairs, but the engagement had been broken off by mutual consent some months before, and there was no sign that it had left any very profound feeling behind it. For the rest the man's life moved in a narrow and conventional circle, for his habits were quiet and his nature unemotional. Yet it was upon this easy going young aristocrat that death came in most strange and unexpected form between the hours of 10 and 10:30 on the night of March 30, 1891.

Ronald Adair was fond of cards, playing continually, but never for such stakes as would hurt him. He was a member of the Baldwin, the Cavendish and the Bagatelle card clubs. It was shown that after dinner on the day of his death he had played a rubber of whist at the latter club. He had also played there in the afternoon. The evidence of those who had played with him—Mr. Murray, Sir John Hardy and Colonel Moran—showed that the game was whist and that there was a fairly equal fall of the cards. Adair might have lost 25, but not more. His fortune was a considerable one, and such a loss could not in any way affect him. He had played nearly every day at one club or other, but he was a cautious player and usually rose a winner. It came out in evidence that in partnership with Colonel Moran he had actually won as much as £420 in a sitting some weeks before from Godfrey Miller and Lord Balmoral. So much for his recent history as it came out at the inquest.

On the evening of the crime he returned from the club exactly at 10. His mother and sister were out spending the evening with a relative. The servant deposed that she heard him enter the front room on the second floor, generally used as his sitting room. She had lit a fire, and as it smoked she had opened the window. No sound was heard from the room until 11:20, the hour of the return of Lady Maynooth and her daughter. Desiring to say good night, she attempted to enter her son's room. The door was locked on the inside and no answer could be got to their cries and knocking. Help was obtained and the door forced. The unfortunate young man was found lying near the table. His head had been horribly mutilated by an expanding revolver bullet, but no weapon of any sort was to be found in the room. On the table lay two bank notes for £10 each and £17 10s. in silver and gold, the money arranged in little piles of varying amount. There were some figures also upon a sheet of paper, with the names of some club friends opposite to them, from which it was conjectured that before his death he was endeavoring to make out his losses or winnings at cards.

A minute examination of the circumstances seemed only to make the case more complex. In the first place, no person could have given why the young man should have fastened the door upon the inside. There was the possibility that the murderer had done this and had afterward escaped by the window. The drop was at least twenty feet, however, and a bed of crouches in full bloom lay beneath. Neither the flowers nor the earth showed any sign of having been disturbed, nor were there any marks upon the narrow strip of grass which separated the house from the road. Apparently therefore it was the young man himself who had fastened the door. But how did he come by his death? No one could have climbed up to the window without leaving traces. Suppose a man had fired through the window, he would indeed be a remarkable shot who could with a revolver inflict so deadly a wound. Again, Park lane is a frequented thoroughfare. There is a cab stand within a hundred yards of the house. No one had heard a shot. And yet there was the dead man and there the revolver bullet, which had shattered out, as soft nosed bullets will, and so inflicted a wound which must have caused instantaneous death. Such were the circumstances of the Park lane mystery, which were further complicated by entire absence of motive, since, as I have said, young Adair was not known to have any enemy, and no attempt had been made to remove the money or valuables in the room.

All day I turned these facts over in my mind, endeavoring to hit upon some theory which could reconcile them all and to find that line of least resistance which my poor friend had declared to be the starting point of every investigation. I confess that I made little progress. In the evening I strolled across the park and found myself about 6 o'clock at the Oxford street end of Park lane. A group of loafers upon the pavements, all staring up at a particular window, directed me to the house which I had come to see. A tall, thin man with colored glasses, whom I strongly suspected of being a plain clothes detective, was pointing out some theory of his own, while the others crowded around to listen to what he said. I got as near him as I could, but his observations seemed to me to be absurd, so I withdrew again in some disgust. As I did so I struck against an elderly, deformed man who had been behind me, and I knocked down several books which he was carrying. I remember that as I picked them up I observed the title of one of them, "The Origin of Tree Worship," and it struck me that the fellow must be some poor bibliophile who either as a trade or as a hobby was a collector of obscure volumes. I endeavored to apologize for the accident, but it was

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erident that these books which I had so unfortunately mislaid were very precious objects in the eyes of their owner. With a start of contempt he turned upon his heel, and I saw his curved back and white side whiskers disappearing among the throng.

My observations of 427 Park lane did little to clear up the problem in which I was interested. The house was separated from the street by a low wall and railing, the whole not more than five feet high. It was perfectly easy, therefore, for any one to get into the garden, but the window was entirely inaccessible since there was no water-pipe or anything which could help the most active man to climb it. More puzzled than ever, I retraced my steps to Kensington. I had not been in my study five minutes when the maid entered to say that a person desired to see me. To my astonishment it was none other than my strange old book collector, his sharp, wrinkled face peering out from a frame of white hair, and his precious volumes, a dozen of them at least, wedged under his right arm.

"You're surprised to see me, sir," said he in a strange, croaking voice.

I acknowledged that I was.

"Well, I've a conscience, sir, and when I chance to see you go into this house as I came hobnobbing after you, I thought to myself 'I'll just step in and see that kind gentleman and tell him that if I was a bit gruff in my manner there was not any harm meant and that I am much obliged to him for picking up my books.'"

"You make too much of a trade," said I. "May I ask how you know who I was?"

"Yes, sir. If it isn't too great a liberty I am a neighbor of yours, for you'll find my little bookshop at the corner of Church street, and very happy to see you, I am sure. Maybe you collect yourself, sir. Here's 'British Birds' and 'Cottolins' and 'The Holy War'—a bargain, every one of them. With five volumes you could just fill that gap on that second shelf. It looks tidy, does it not, sir?"

I moved my head to look at the cabinet behind me. When I turned again Sherlock Holmes was standing smiling at me across my study table. I rose to my feet, stared at him for some seconds in utter amazement, and then it appears that I must have fainted for the first and the last time in my life. Certainly a gray mist swirled before my eyes, and when it cleared I found my collar ends undone and the tingling after-taste of brandy upon my lips. Holmes was bending over my chair, his task in his hand.

"My dear Watson," said the well remembered voice, "I owe you a thousand apologies. I had no idea that you would be so affected."

I gripped him by the arms.

"Holmes!" I cried. "Is it really you? Can it indeed be that you are alive? Is it possible that you succeeded in climbing out of that awful abyss?"

"Wait a moment," said he. "Are you sure that you are really fit to discuss things? I have given you a serious shock by my unnecessarily dramatic reappearance."

"I am all right, but indeed, Holmes, I can hardly believe my eyes. Good heavens, to think that you—of all men—should be standing in my study!" Again I gripped him by the sleeve and felt the thin, shrewy arm beneath it. "Well, you're not a spirit anyhow," said I. "My dear chap, I'm overjoyed to see you. Sit down and tell me how you came alive out of that dreadful chasm."

He sat opposite to me and lit a cigarette in his old nonchalant manner. He was dressed in the sooty frock coat of the book merchant, but the rest of that individual lay in a pile of white hair and old boots upon the chair. Holmes looked even thinner and keener than of old, but there was a dead white tinge in his aquiline face which told me that his life recently had not been a healthy one.

"I am glad to stretch myself, Watson," said he. "It is no joke when a tall man has to take a foot off his stature for several hours on end. Now, my dear fellow, in the matter of these explanations, we have, if I may ask for your co-operation, a hard and dangerous night's work in front of us. Perhaps it would be better if I gave you an account of the whole situation when that work is finished."

"You'll come with me tonight?"

"When you like and where you like."

"This is, indeed, like the old days. We shall have time for a mouthful of dinner before we need go. Well, then, about that chasm. I had as serious difficulty in getting out of it for the very simple reason that I never was in it."

"You never were in it?"

"No, Watson, I never was in it. My note to you was absolutely genuine. I had little doubt that I had come to the end of my career when I perceived the somewhat sinister figure of the late Professor Moriarty standing upon the narrow pathway which led to safety. I read an inexorable purpose in his gray eyes. I exchanged some remarks with him, therefore, and obtained his courteous permission to write the short note which you afterward received. I left it with my cigarette box and my stick, and I walked along the pathway, Moriarty still at my heels. When I reached the end of the road at bay, he drew no weapon, but he rushed at me and threw his long arms round me. He knew that his own game was up and was only anxious to revenge himself upon me. We tottered together upon the brink of the fall. I have some knowledge, however, of basket, or the Japanese system of wrestling, which has more than once been very useful to me. I slipped through his grip, and he with a horrible scream kicked madly for a few seconds and clawed the air with both his hands. But for all his efforts he could not get his balance, and over he went. With my face over the brink I saw him fall for a long way. Then he struck a rock, bounded off and splashed into the water."

I listened with amazement to this explanation, which Holmes delivered between the puffs of his cigarette.

"But the tracks!" I cried. "I saw with my own eyes that two went down the path and none returned."

"It came about in this way. The instant that the professor had disappeared I struck me what a really extraordinary lucky chance fate had played in my way. I knew that Moriarty was not the only man who had

sworn my death. There were at least three others whose desire for vengeance upon me would only be increased by the death of their leader. They were all most dangerous men. One he would certainly get me. On the other hand, if all the world was convinced that I was dead they would take liberties with themselves, and sooner or later I could destroy them. That it would be time for me to announce that I was still in the land of the living. So rapidly I did the brain act that I believe I had thought this all out before Professor Moriarty had reached the bottom of the Reichsbach fall."

"I stood up and examined the rocky wall behind me. In my picturesque account of the matter, which I read with great interest some months later, you assert that the wall was sheer. That was not literally true. A few small footholds presented themselves, and there was some indication of a ledge. The cliff is so high that to climb it all was an obvious impossibility, and it was equally impossible to make my way along the wet path without leaving some tracks. I might, it is true, have reversed my boots, as I have done on similar occasions, but the sight of three sets of tracks in one direction would certainly have suggested a deception. On the whole, then, it is best that I should risk the climb. It was not a pleasant business, Watson. The fall roared beneath me. I am not a



SHERLOCK HOLMES WAS STANDING SMILING AT ME.

fanciful person, but I give you my word that I seemed to hear Moriarty's voice screaming at me out of the abyss. A mistake would have been fatal. More than once as tufts of grass came out in my hand or my foot slipped in the wet patches of the rock I thought that I was gone. But I struggled upward, and at last I reached a ledge several feet deep and covered with soft green moss, where I could lie unseen in the most perfect comfort. There I was stretched when you, my dear Watson, and all your following were investigating in the most sympathetic and inefficient manner the circumstances of my death.

"At last, when you had all formed your inevitable and totally erroneous conclusions, you departed for the hotel, and I was left alone. I had imagined that I had reached the end of my adventures, but a very unexpected occurrence showed me that there were surprises still in store for me. A huge rock, falling from above, boomed past me, struck the path and bounded over into the chasm. For an instant I thought that it was an accident, but a moment later, looking up, I saw a man's head against the darkening sky, and another stone struck the very ledge upon which I was stretched, within a foot of my head. Of course the meaning of this was obvious. Moriarty had not been alone. A confederate—and even that one glance had told me how dangerous a man that confederate was—had kept guard while the professor had attacked me. From a distance, unseen by me, he had been a witness of his friend's death and of my escape. He had waited, and then, making his way around to the top of the cliff, he had endeavored to succeed where I had failed."

"I did not take long to think about it, Watson. Again I saw that grim face look over the cliff, and I knew that it was the precursor of another stone. I scrambled down on to the path. I

don't think I could have done it in cold blood. It was a hundred times more difficult than getting up. But I had no time to think of the danger, for another stone sang past me as I hung by my hands from the edge of the ledge. Halfway down I slipped, but, by the blessing of God, I landed, torn and bleeding, upon the path. I took to my heels, did ten miles over the mountains in the darkness, and a week later I found myself in Florence, with the certainty that no one in the world knew what had become of me."

"I had only one confidant—my brother Mycroft. I owe you many apologies, my dear Watson, but it was all important that it should be thought I was dead, and it is quite certain that you would have written so convincing an account of my unhappy end had you not yourself thought that it was true. Several times during the last three years I have taken up my pen to write to you, but always I feared lest your affectionate regard for me should tempt you to some indiscretion which would betray my secret. For that reason I turned away from you this evening when you tossed my books for I was in danger at the time, and any show of surprise and emotion upon your part

might have drawn attention to my identity and led to the most deplorable and irreparable results. As to Mycroft, I had to confide in him in order to obtain the money which I needed. The course of events in London did not run

as well as I had hoped, for the trial of the Moriarty gang left two of its most dangerous members, my own most vindictive enemies, at liberty. I traveled for two years in Tibet, therefore, and amused myself by visiting Lassa and spending some days with the head lama. You may have read of the remarkable explorations of a Norwegian named Sigurd, but I am sure that it never occurred to you that you were receiving news of your friend. I then passed through Persia, looked in at Mecca and paid a short but interesting visit to the Khalifa at Khartoum, the results of which I have communicated to the foreign office. Returning to France, I spent some months in a research into the coal tar derivatives, which I conducted in a laboratory at Montpellier, in the south of France. Having concluded this to my satisfaction and learning that only one of my enemies was now left in London, I was about to return when my movements were hastened by the news of this very remarkable Park lane mystery, which, not only expected to me by its own merits, but which seemed to offer some most peculiar personal opportunities. I came over at once to London, called

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